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LINGUISTIC FEATURE PROXIMITY FOR ACQUIRING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION AMONG INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS: ARABIC AS THE BRIDGE

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Abstract

Among Indonesian EFL learners, producing accurate English pronunciation seems to be a tedious journey. The case is that English pronunciation requires cautious articulatory organ laxity, in which it is totally different from the acquired L1 competence. The researchers are there with the assumption that the challenge is due to distinct differences between the phonological features of the two languages from two different hemispheres, English rooting from Germanic language family from the West and Bahasa rooting from Austronesian family from the East. What is left unveiled is that whether Semitic language, Arabic, from the Middle East, could potentially bridge the acquisition of English as the target language of Indonesian EFL learners. This current study aims for the above quest. Library research was employed to compare the phonological features and relations among the three concerned languages. Revisiting some key references highlighting the three languages, this current study synthesizes each notion. On the basis of the library research on relevant theories in regards to how English, Arabic, and Bahasa portray their consonants and distinguishing sounds, this current study has inferred the followings: (1) English and Arabic are said to share more similarities than that of Bahasa, in terms of phonological features; (2) The prediction of territory proximity contributing to linguistic feature similarity has been tentatively proven. Accordingly, Germanic and Semitic languages are somewhat closer in linguistic features than Germanic to Austronesian language; and (3) tapped as the mediator between two languages from two different world hemispheres—English and Bahasa—Arabic, as the Middle-East language—is projected as the bridge when it comes to acquiring English for Indonesian EFL learners.

Keywords

EFL learners, English pronunciation, phonological features

1 INTRODUCTION

As far back as a history of mankind can be traced, there has been a myriad of diverse languages spoken by human beings across the universe. No wonder that up to the present time, it is still impossible to specify the estimated number of languages, let alone the precise ones, as many of them are hardly known; while several others are still in the moot of determining whether they belong to established languages or rather dialects of the same languages (Katzner, 2002). *Ethnologue*—the languages' largest database in the world—nevertheless, lists 6909 living languages from 228 different countries (Austin and Sallabank, 2011). Further, these thousands of languages have been categorized into a number of language families. This categorization itself is set based on the typology shared by each language; in other words, the language typology is rooted from the resemblance of characteristics among various related languages (Slobin, 2006; Shopen, 2007). These characteristics include vocabulary and some grammatical features such as phonology, morphology, and syntax. Therefore, it can be said that languages belonging to the same family prospectively share several, or even many, features with each other.

Speakers of languages that belong to the same family are usually parts of the same speech community. This speech community itself is usually defined by closeness in terms of language norms and aspects due to geographical situation. For example, Arabic and Hebrew—which share many similar norms and aspects—belong to the Semitic

Language Family which is mainly spoken in Arabian Peninsula and some parts of North Africa, which geographically are close to each other (Lipinski, 1997).

However, although languages sharing similar characteristics are often grouped into the same language family, it may not be wise to bluntly assume that languages from different families are completely distinctive. Several respective studies conducted by Lestiono and Gusdian (2017a; 2017b) and Gusdian and Lestiono (2018) have shown that two languages from different families may actually have couples of similarities. In these studies, Arabic—a Semitic language—due to several phonological similarities to English—a Germanic language—is proven to assist Indonesian EFL learners in pronouncing English words.

In the light of the previous findings, the researchers come to the assumptions that English and Arabic may share more phonological likenesses than that of Bahasa, in terms of phonological features; the geographical proximity between the West and Middle East as compared to the West and East may play a significant role in the existence of the similarity; and thus Arabic may function as a bridge between the two languages especially in terms of assisting Indonesian EFL students to learn English.

It is the aim of the study to reveal whether Arabic, a Semitic language, could possibly assist Indonesian EFL learners in the acquisition of English—a Germanic language. Library research was conducted to compare the phonological features and relations among these three languages.

2 LANGUAGE FAMILY

Rowe and Levine (2015) illustrate that languages belonging to a certain language family are those descending from what-so-called parental language; it is generally known as a proto-language (Campbell, 2004). In other words, a single language family consists of several languages which are inherently related. A proto-language itself cannot be revealed immediately. It rather is established hypothetically through a series of a linguistic construction, in which the features of a group of languages with common resemblances are compared in order to dig out their genetically shared characteristics (Rowe and Levine, 2015). The result of such construction is then set as the base of the hypothesis for the proto-language in which the proto-language must comprise the proto-forms of its daughter languages. Several eminent proto-languages are Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Semitic, and Proto-Austronesian.

Over the course of time, a proto-language may putatively spread into dialects which then form several—even numerous—language families within the same geographical proximate as the speech communities grow larger. For instance, Proto-Indo-European, which according to the language reconstruction, is perceived as the ancestor of the Indo-European language family spoken in Europe and parts of Asia such as Germanic, Celtic, Slavic, Persian, Sanskrit, and Yiddish (Mallory and Adams, 1997; Benjamin, 2004). Moreover, it is reported there are 141 language families reported in *Ethnologue*. This number is expected to get bigger as there must be numerous local languages that have not been explored yet.

3 GERMANIC LANGUAGE FAMILY

Germanic is one of the divisions of the greater Indo-European language family. Germanic is spoken by around 500 million people predominantly in North America, Europe, and Oceania (Hammarström et.al, 2017). This language family is divided further into North Germanic and East Germanic. From *Ethnologue*, it is perceived that there are around 48 spoken languages belonging to these three branches; among of those, West Germanic has become the most extensively used with the big three living languages, namely English (more than 300 million native speakers), German (around 100 million native speakers), and Dutch (no less than 20 million users). Meanwhile, North Germanic develops as Nordic languages of which speakers are Scandinavian. East Germanic comprises Gothic—the language of Vandals and Burgundies—which has come into an extinction.

Germanic languages are well-known for their characteristics which distinguish them from other Indo-European languages, especially in the aspect of phonology. One of the most famous distinctive features is their consonant shifts, better known as Grimm's law (Campbell, 2004; Elspaß et.al, 2007; Hammarström et.al, 2017; Moulton and Buccini, 2018). Such a law is named after Jacob Grimm, a German philologist, who first discovered the stop consonants in Proto-Indo-European language and their later development in Germanic language. Grimm's Law comprises three main parts, i.e., (1) Indo-European voiceless stop consonants convert into voiceless fricative consonants in Germanic; (2)

Indo-European voiced stop consonants become voiceless stop consonants in Germanic; and (3) Indo-European voiced aspirated stop consonants shift into either fricatives or voiced stop consonants as allophones—several spoken sounds used to indicate a single phoneme. A few examples of (1), (2), and (3) respectively are illustrated in a table below:

No	Indo-European	Germanic
1	/b/, /d/, /g/	/p/, /t/, /k/
2	/p/, /t/, /k/	/f/, /θ/, /x/
3	/b ^h /, /d ^h /, /g ^h /	/b/ or /β/; /d/ or /ð/; /g/ or /ɣ/

Table 1. Consonant Shifts from Indo-European to Germanic Languages

In addition to the afore-mentioned consonant shifts, other distinctive characteristics of Germanic language include vowel systems, declensions in grammatical structures, as well as conjugations (Campbell, 2004; Moulton and Buccini, 2018).

4 SEMITIC LANGUAGE FAMILY

In Hetzron (1997); Lipinski (1997); and Testen (2018), it is explained that languages of Semitic originally come from Afro-Asiatic language family which is, geographically, dispersed throughout the Middle East. The term Semitic itself derives from Shem, the name of son of Noah in the book of Genesis. In addition, the native speakers of Semitic languages reside in the area of not only Middle East, but also Western Asia, and Northern Africa.

In the later development, Semitic is divided further into two subdivisions, namely East Semitic and West Semitic. The East Semitic languages, which consist of Akkadian and Eblaite, have been inexistent for centuries. Meanwhile, West Semitic is the foremost sub-group of Semitic languages as this subdivision includes Arabic, Hebrew, Ethiopic, Aramaic, and South Arabian; and among these, Arabic becomes the major language with the biggest number of native speakers with more than 200 million speakers by the twenty-first century (Rubin, 2008).

Similar to the above-explained Germanic language, the unique features of Semitic languages are represented in all of the linguistic aspects, such as phonology, morphology, vocab, and grammar. For example, in terms of Semitic phonology, although Semitic languages display some similarities to those in other language families, this language family is known for its typical use of the back part of the mouth and throat comparing to other language families (Testen, 2018). Accordingly, it is not a surprise that laryngeal, pharyngeal, and uvular sounds are commonly present in Semitic. The laryngeal sound is indicated when glottal stop is produced, for instance when Cockney English—the English spoken by the working-class Londoners—pronounce the word water as /wɒ'ə/ and bottle as /bɒ'ə/. Meanwhile, pharyngeal consonant in Semitic is produced through contracting the air flow at the pharynx voicelessly; and the phonetic transcription of this sound is /ħ/. Then, turning to uvular consonant, such a sound is formed when the back part of the tongue touches the uvula. Then in the Semitic languages this uvular sounds are fricatives with /q/ as the phonetic transcription.

5 AUSTRONESIAN LANGUAGE FAMILY

Austronesian languages are mainly spoken by people in Southeast Asia, Madagascar, and Oceania. According to Blust (2016), by the twenty-first century, there are approximately 386 million native speakers of Austronesian, making this language family one of the biggest language families in terms of the number of native speakers. Besides, it is also enlisted that Austronesian becomes the second larger language family with regard to the number of subdivisions in which it has more or less 1200 language branches. Some of the biggest subdivisions include Melayu-Polynesian, Formosan, Buyun, and Western Plains languages.

Not far different from both of its predecessors, the characteristics of Austronesian language family are present in all levels of linguistic structures. In terms of its phonological aspect, Blust (2016) asserts that the majority of Austronesian languages have around 16 to 22 consonant sounds and 4 or 5 vowel sounds. Further, regarding the fact that Austronesian language family consists of a very large numbers of branches, it is obvious that a wide-ranging speech sounds are found—including some of the most uncommon ones. Blust (2016) also affirms that these greatly various kinds of sounds may exist in not only Austronesian language family, but also in other language families in the world (including the previously mentioned ones).

6 WHAT DO GERMANIC, SEMITIC, AND AUSTRONESIAN LANGUAGES HAVE IN COMMON?

It has been revealed in a series of studies conducted by Lestiono and Gusdian (2017a; 2017b) and Gusdian and Lestiono (2018) that such a close connection exists between English and Arabic particularly in terms of phonological aspects. The findings of these studies demonstrate that English and Arabic share more consonants in common than English and Bahasa do. Lestiono and Gusdian (2017a; 2017b) explain that there are at least five consonants which are present in both Arabic and English, but not in Bahasa; these consonants are /θ/, /ð/, /dʒ/, /ʒ/, and /ʃ/. As the results, Gusdian and Lestiono (2018) suggest that Arabic can be projected as a facilitator to acquire accurate English pronunciation for Indonesian EFL students.

In addition, due to this similarity, it is also being predicted that a geographical proximity between Arabic and English may play a pivotal role. Arabic, a Semitic language situated in the Middle East and ranging across the Western parts of Asia, is somewhat related to English, a Germanic language, which is a part of the big Indo-European family in Europe. Then, reflecting to this, a big question follows; has there been any proof of such convincing relation between these language families?

7 LITERATURE EVIDENCE

By and large, there has not been any convincing theory about the relation between Semitic and Indo-European or any other language families. However, several suggestions for grouping both families have been made. One of the most well-known proposal is from Hermann Möller, a Danish linguist, who became the first person ever suggesting a close relationship between Semitic and Indo-European (Levin, 1995). Möller's

idea on this merging proposal was not without a reason as there are several major similarities in the aspects of grammar, syntax, and phonology—as also previously noted by Lestiono and Gusdian (2017a; 2017b). Another suggestion was proposed by Ascoli, a philologist from Austria, who has come up with a hypothesis of 'Indo-Semitic' (Cuny in Mallory and Adams, 1997). This Indo-Semitic idea refers to a belief that a genetic connection between Semitic and Indo-European families does exist due to numerous historical proofs.

Despite the fact that the idea of merging these families into a larger sub-family has been supported considering several evidences, such an idea has never been broadly acknowledged by most linguists up to this present time. Even, this idea no longer becomes an appealing research topic for decades. It can be seen from the fact that very few number of literature discusses the correspondence of both language families; Mallory and Adams (1997) and Lavine (1997) are some of few researchers discussing this topic.

Actually, a rationale why this Indo-Semitic topic may no longer be provoking is that other language families in the world, such as Afrosiatic and Austronesian, hypothetically, may also have a genealogical link to either language as well. It is due to the reason that although they belong to different language families, they somewhat may still share the same features. For example, Austronesian language family shares some phonological aspects with either Indo-European or Semitic language; in other words, there are sounds found in both Austronesian and Semitic, but absent in Indo-European language. One of the phonological similarities is the uvular sound, which is found in some Austronesian and Semitic languages. Moreover, Javanese, as one of the branches of Austronesian, recognizes *Arab Pegon*, Arabic alphabets used to write Javanese language as an alternative to the Latin ones. Although *Arab Pegon* includes some sounds which do not appear in the actual Arabic, many of the sounds in these alphabets are acknowledged in both languages. This, once again, may support the Semitic-Austronesian relationship theory.

Although some other sounds are present in Austronesian and Indo-European, yet absent in Semitic, the number of similarities is fewer compared to those between Austronesian and Semitic. The distinct phonological similarity is the existence of laryngeal stops found in all of these language families (Benjamin, 2004; Blust, 2016; Hammarström et al, 2017). Therefore, the previous tentative prediction on the role of territorial proximity may seem to be true. Geographically, Austronesian family is distant from Germanic—Indo-European family; and that Semitic is way more proximate to Germanic language family, in terms of phonological features. Within the tentative notion, it can be inferred that due to some consonant similarities between Arabic (Semitic language family) and English (Germanic language family), some Arabic sounds are able to be projected as mediators—particularly for Indonesian EFL learners—to learn English pronunciation.

8 CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study has tapped the followings: (1) English and Arabic are said to share more similarities than that of Bahasa, in terms of phonological features; (2) The

prediction of territory proximity contributing to phonological feature similarity has been tentatively proven; and (3) Due to some consonant similarities between English and Arabic, Arabic is projected as the bridge when it comes to acquiring English for Indonesian EFL learners, considering their necessary background on Arabic sounds.

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